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TEACHING CREATIVE WRITING TO EMOTIONALLY-HANDICAPPED ADOLESCENTS.

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AN EFFECTIVE AND PLEASANT THERAPEUTIC EFFECT CAN BE PRODUCED BY ENCOURAGING EMOTIONALLY-DISTURBED ADOLESCENTS TO LOOK AT, WORK WITH, AND WRITE UNRESTRICTEDLY ABOUT NATURAL BEAUTY. THEIR OCCASIONAL UNRESPONSIVENESS IS CHANGED TO WILLINGNESS AND THEIR CREATIVE EFFORTS ARE RE-DIRECTED FROM EXPRESSIONS OF FEAR AND DESPAIR AS THEY OBSERVE COLORFUL POSTCARDS, PRINTS, AND MAGAZINE ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE GRAND CANYON, AND COLLECT DESCRIPTIVE ADJECTIVES AND VERBS TO PORTRAY THE POWER, BEAUTY, AND MOVEMENT OF THE SCENES THEY ENCOUNTER. WHEN POETRY ABOUT THE GRAND CANYON AND GROFFE'S "GRAND CANYON SUITE" IS READ AND PLAYED TO THEM, MANY STUDENTS OF THEIR OWN VOLITION BEGIN TO WRITE DESCRIPTIVELY OR POETICALLY. THE PROJECT CAN BE EXPANDED TO INCLUDE MANY OTHER NATURAL BEAUTY AREAS. (EXAMPLES OF STUDENTS' WRITING ARE INCLUDED.) THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "ENGLISH JOURNAL," VOL. 56 (APRIL 1967), 603-606, 609. (JB)

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Teaching Creative Writing to Emotionally-Handicapped Adolescents

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THERE is only one reason for writing this article. Four years ago I began teaching English in an accredited school for emotionally-handicapped adolescents who were confined in a state hospital. I found no help anywhere for teaching these special students in the area of English. There was much material in this category for children but very little for adolescents.

After many trials and errors, a few ideas, which were successful, evolved. I feel impelled to share these experiences with others who find themselves in the same predicament.

The value of creative writing for these exceptional students was learned by sheer accident. In one of our English classes there was a very disturbed, exceptionally hostile girl who wrote poetry constantly. What she wrote dripped with the "blood and gore" of a rabid religious background which was accentuated and exaggerated by this disturbed adolescent. The sadism, the fears, the hates, and the despairs were overwhelmingly present in her writing. As she brought this poetry to the teacher, no comment was made. It was impossible to tell Mary what a distressing effect her poetry had on the instructor because of the dangerous consequences which might have been the result for this ill, unstable adolescent.

Finally, one day she said: "I don't believe you like my poetry." The continuous silence about her poetry had produced the desired effect.

To her statement, the teacher replied that she needed something in a happier vein. In desperation, her instructor literally grabbed a packet of postal cards containing pictures of the seashore, gloriously colored flowers, and the like. The teacher asked, "Why don't you write a poem about these beautiful spots?"

This she did. From this beginning of descriptive writing evolved some truly lovely poetry. This new kind of writing eventually contributed to the turning point in her illness, for as soon as she began writing about beauty, her despondency and hostility started to wane.

Here are several examples of her best poems. This first poem is one of her early descriptive ones:

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I SEE A LEAF

I see a leaf. Twirling, swirling, twisting,
mad cap and held on with wind's forces.
Single leaf attempting to fall peacefully
to the earth and be with its fellow
leaves.
Grieves the day for the morrow to come
as night befalls.
All four walls of night become
And slowly, slowly, softly the scattered,
tattered leaf falls to the earth, quieter
than the most distant drums.

The next two poems she wrote immediately before leaving the hospital:

I SEE A CHILD

I see Thy peace in the face of a sleeping
child
I see the sweetness in a small virgin child.
I see the compassionate love of a child
for a small wooly lamb.
I see purity's face in the look of a child
as he beholds evil.
I see innocent's look as the child asks a
startling question.
I see bright halos glow as the child enters
God's church.
I see an angel nobody knew was around,
and that was the child.

I SEE A MOTHER

I see bright sun's glow in a mother's
face as she beholds her first born.
I see stars twinkle in those eyes as her
child gurgles out its first word.
I see love's warm glow as she looks in on
her sleeping child.
I see worry's look as she whispers out her
desperate prayer.
I see gentleness beam from her face as
her child holds out a pricked finger.
I see a guardian angel nobody knew was
there and that was the mother.

It is interesting to note that this girl left the hospital, attended and graduated from a public high school. She kept on writing poetry and found it so helpful that she taught a school friend what she knew of poetic writing. Whether she will continue this creative activity in her later life is beside the point, for it played its therapeutic role when she needed it.

This student played an important part also in awakening the teacher to the fact that creative writing could be used for other students in distress.

One day, a short time prior to Mary's discharge from the hospital, a new, seriously disturbed student came into our class. Nothing the teacher suggested or did seemed to elicit any interest. Finally, Mary came to the instructor's desk and shoved a packet of her postal cards into the teacher's hand and said:

"Why don't you have him write as you had me write?"

I followed her suggestion and found the pictures were successful in initiating an interest in something for this disturbed student too.

Ultimately, it dawned on me that if this type of creative writing was successful with two students, it might be profitable to attempt it with all students. The first class experiment was initiated with the most advanced English students.

I found and mounted colorful pictures of the Grand Canyon. My source for these was chiefly the *Arizona* Magazine. The students spent a one-hour class period in looking at these pictures and collecting words that could be used to describe this scintillating beauty. Casually, these descriptive words became known as adjectives. Because this collection of pictures encompassed the four seasons, we needed action words to portray the movement in these pictures. These words which motivated power and action quietly became verbs. The next day the teacher read a collection of poetry about the Grand Canyon. The authors of these selections were such poets as Carl Sandburg, Henry Van Dyke, Edgar Lee Masters. The students enjoyed matching the poems to the pictures. On the third day

of this project, they listened to Groffé's "Grand Canyon Suite," as recorded by Andre Kostelanetz and his orchestra. Interestingly enough, while listening to the music, the students started writing of their own volition. Here are two samples of the outcome of this project:

OF GREATER THINGS

As I approached the rim, I became keenly aware of a trembling sensation, as if the age old cliffs and weather beaten rocks were at last failing, crumbling, collapsing, and I, alone, was here to witness its downfall. But no, this is unthinkable. And there, near the completion of my ascent, it was as if the very skies themselves had opened up and upon my head was dropped the terrible reality of life. I felt stunned, crushed, defeated at the sudden realization that it was not this mortifying creation of rock which waivered, but rather it was I, a mere mortal, suddenly terrified at my close proximity to a supreme being who not only claimed the craftsmanship of this monumental destruction, but my own creation as well. I continued my climb, as one obsessed to gaze upon an unspeakable terror. Then I saw it. From the rim of hard glazed rock upon which I stood, I commanded a view of the entire terrible splendor of rock spread upon rock—cracked, chipped at the edges, but for all this it presented a picture of undeniable strength, of immortality. As I stared, fascinated at the grotesque faces firmly implanted in bodies of granite, I became aware of bitter laughter, mocking laughter, originating in the inner-most depths of steel stomachs, and making its appearance through strong lips wedged between two mountains. They with their defiance to even nature itself, could laugh sadistically at my plight, and I was rendered helpless before them. I whirled and began my journey anew. Where I had come from now became as confusingly hazy as where I was to go. But looking over my shoulder, for a last stolen glance of this morbid panorama, I realize that this was not final defeat, but rather the beginning. One deep breath, and likened to a Pegasus, I flew down the jagged mountainside, exalted, with renewed faith in the grandeur of a lowly human being, and of greater things.

THE GREAT GRAND CANYON

Say what you like of the cliffs and clouds
You've seen in other places.
Sum it all up in the looks recorded
On half the nation's faces.
The rainbow—a promise—a thought—an illusion
Seen a moment and then lost in cloud's confusion.
Gullies that challenge, question, confuse
Is it a moment's paradise or only a moment's ruse?
Snow in winter, sun in summer,
Things that cause the mind to pause a moment and wonder.
Water, water, cool and clear
Seeming ever to hurry and rush and come from far and near.
Choose a gully, a trail, a path
Follow it out—and find for yourself—which will last
Which will lead us on to the rainbow's end
Which will catch the rainbow's color
And which will bend.
These are the moment's wonders
These are the moment's fears
These are some things to remember
For all the rest of the years.

This same project has been tried several times with various groups of students. Although, very often, the results are not great productions; at least, the students have fun creating. It should be added that our horizons have expanded to include all kinds of nature pictures. Many times students bring lovely prints to add to our collection which includes seasonal pictures of many different and favorite places. Somehow, looking at and working with beauty is a most pleasant

and helpful experience for these exceptional adolescents.

As the teacher, I learned once again that freedom to write enables many students to express their problems, desires, fears, hopes, and dreams in a manner which is therapeutic for them. It is understood in our English classes that if one is impelled to write, even though he might be working on another assignment, he has the privilege of writing during any class period.

The following poems are a few samples of those which certainly express the needs, reactions, and rebellions of these disturbed students:

LONELINESS

Loneliness grows
Unrelentingly at
My soul,
A cold, aching void
That knows no joy
And can never be filled.
Infinite emptiness,
Eternal sorrow,
These things keep me
From my heart's
Desire.

GONE

Silence, warm and
Enveloping,
Not quite silence,
The scratch of pencils
The monotonous hum
Of an air conditioner,
The faded blur of the
Teacher's voice,
These few sounds
Filter through.
I cannot shut
Them out.
The shell is breaking,
They come!
I am alone now
Friendless
Buffeted by the wind
I have no wall
To protect me.

FULL CIRCLE

Imagine ourselves imagined: who thought
  us up? The one
Who could suppose a race of such
  supposers
Would have to be Imagination plus,
Extrapolating variables in variables,
Till we imagine Him as He did us.

THE LONELY SEA

I stood alone, to meditate,
When I heard the waters break,
It was as though they were crying out,
Their soft whisper was like a shout,
Oh! lonely sea, why are you so blue?
Lonely sea, I'm lonely too.
The tall, tall trees were standing there
Playing in the breeze, without a care.
And then I heard, and it did say,
Happiness shall return, one fine day,
And now the sea cries no more,
Happiness now stands at her door.

And one more poem:

When one withdraws from the contest
  of life,
Goes to a world of inner strife,
One wanders like a gaunt shadow in the
Moonlight destined to eternal dimness.
One knows not of what burden his mind
  is handling.
But what laxity of spirit is imposing on
  him
The game of life goes on immortally
  while
The wounded retreats into a forest of
  emptiness.
But wait! What is that I see?
Is it a star?—A star just before dawn.
Its light burns hot and sure
It seems to pull up the sun to the
  horizon
Then gradually, very quietly, dissolves
  into sunlight.
How does this affect the lonely wanderer
Who walks in silence?
A votive candle begins to glow in his eyes
A little warmth enkindles his heart

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The back straightens up
The walk has purpose
The days begin with hope
The spectre emerges from the forest
To find a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow;
The key to the door of expectations.

We are convinced from the results of our four years of experimentation with creative writing, that the unrestricted and unstructured freedom to write, has been a useful and valuable experience in the lives of our emotionally handicapped adolescents.